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Researching Court Performance

The royal courts have long been recognised as patrons of early drama. But the institution of the court presents us with a performance culture which is more complex, diverse and challenging than that of any scripted play. It is a culture in which performers and spectators shift and blur into each other; in which entertainment and leisure are inseparable from power and politics; a culture of vivid spectacle and of subtle obliqueness. At court, performance offers not so much a recognisably alternative play world, as a performed extension of courtly life itself, which is always lived largely in public. Plays are only one strand in a world of performance in which monarchs, courtiers and nobles can function as actors, playwrights and directors, as well as spectators and recipients, of courtly show.

Formal theatrical entertainment at court often included plays and interludes, but records suggest that from the later Middle Ages through until the late sixteenth century participatory shows involving various mixtures of dance, music, spectacle and speech were more common and more prestigious, with more resource lavished on them.¹ Many of these performances seem to have included no verbal elements, and even where they did there is rarely anything in the way of a surviving script. This might tend to unsettle our normal practices of literary or even dramatic research; but in other ways our evidence for court performance is significantly richer and more various than for most early scripted drama. Because the court is a centre of power and attention, we are far more likely to have eyewitness or hearsay reports and descriptions of its entertainments in the act of performance, whether in publicly circulated accounts or private letters.² The court's carefully preserved financial records give us often illuminatingly detailed insight into expenditure on costume, props and settings.³ More of the buildings where the court was entertained survive, making it possible to explore and even sometimes to recreate the spatial contexts of performance. And because those involved as audience, and often as performers, included individuals at the centre of power, we are likely to know more about

¹ Key works on the history of court entertainments include: Welsford; Anglo; Kipling, *Triumph*; Streitberger; Twycross and Carpenter; McGowan.

² Key chronicle accounts include Fabian, Hall. Contemporary correspondence is calendared in the series of Calendars of State Papers, such as CSP and L&P; many of these are now available through MEMSO (*Medieval and Early Modern Sources Online*).

³ For the earlier period most records remain unpublished except in extract. Streitberger offers an invaluable detailed guide to the period 1485-1558 ('Principal Sources', Appendix 1, 393-420). Feuillerat is valuable for 1558-1603.

them and their activities, and thus about the wider implications of the entertainments in which they were involved. The functions and communications of diplomacy, channelled through the court, reveal how the language of courtly performance was itself an international one, reaching almost seamlessly across the princely courts of Europe. Indeed, most European countries preserve bodies of evidence – more or often less accessible – to parallel, and in many cases outdo, those surviving in the British Isles. Court entertainments therefore give us a rich field to explore both the deep and wide cultural functions of performance.

The broad, if erratic and interrupted, wealth of different kinds of evidence enables a similarly wide range of critical and theoretical approaches. We can investigate the theatrical and aesthetic content of court shows (McGowan; Kipling, *Triumph*); we can explore the political contexts and purposes of entertainments both at home and internationally (Anglo, *Spectacle*). Eyewitness accounts allow us privileged access to complex understanding of spectatorship and audience engagement (Carpenter, 'Sixteenth-Century'), while financial records are a rich source for the study of the material culture and organisation of court performance (Streitberger; Kipling, 'Henry VII'). Interests in women and gender representation (McManus), in the semantics of space and place (Dillon; Bennet), in performativity and sensual affect, might all be pursued through this diverse base of evidence. Broader meta-theatrical issues also emerge, as we can trace the porous boundaries between formal court entertainment and the theatricalisation of courtly life itself (Gunn), or the relationship between live performance and retrospective narrative reporting (McGavin). These are all areas in which interesting work has been started in recent years, opening pathways for further exploration, and the evidence base continues to offer fertile ground for new developments in theatre and performance studies.

Engaging with this evidence is somewhat less straightforward than research into scripted drama. A good deal of it survives in manuscript rather than in print, and in spite of publishing initiatives both in the late-nineteenth/early twentieth centuries and during the more recent digital revolution, much of it remains not easily accessible. It is also scattered: having identified a court performance event from, say, a history such as Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Houses of Lancaster and York*, a researcher might need to explore in the as yet unpublished manuscript records of the Revels Accounts, to comb

through the voluminous Calendars and archives of contemporary diplomatic correspondence, to examine alternative memoirs and documentary records, looking not only to local but to national and international sources for sometimes competing reports. For earlier periods, most of the textual material will be in Latin, written by administrators who are not themselves interested in the theatrical dimensions of what they record. Once located, the interpretation of these kinds of primary material calls for different skills and sensibilities from the interpretation of play texts, even though there may be fruitful and important overlap in the kinds of theoretical approach we want to deploy and the kinds of insights into performance and the theatrical that may ultimately emerge. In this essay I shall explore a variety of particular occasions to point to some of the different avenues through which we can approach courtly entertainments and what they can reveal about the complex, fluid and multidimensional performance culture that courtly life fostered and inhabited.

The activities of courtly performance

Spectacle is a particular key to courtly performance. Display – of lavish costume, courtly skill, scenic effects and wealth – was not just the mode but in many ways the purpose of court entertainment. It confirmed the power and status of the court to itself, to its nation and to international visitors, and was the medium through which to demonstrate noble honour and generosity (Malcolm Vale 165-70). Spectacle held together evenings of multimedia entertainment through which the court both diverted itself and enacted its own glory. At the centre of this spectacle, the main tradition of courtly entertainment right through the later middle ages and sixteenth century focused on elaborately costumed dance. Dancing was frequently combined with varying elements of staged spectacle, physical theatre such as combat games, music and song, and spoken scenes of oratory and debate. These elements are common across Europe: forms of dance and associated pageantry were shared and imitated between courts, with the traffic of noble, diplomatic and even royal visitors between countries enabling direct knowledge of, and engagement in, common entertainment practices (eg Kipling, *Triumph*; McGowan). Performance thus offered a language of leisured celebration which enabled the elite of Europe to participate in a mutual reinforcement of their shared courtly identity.

Considered in this way, it is not surprising that dance might occupy a central role in these entertainments. The physical practice of dancing was a courtly skill taught to noble men and women from childhood: there are many records of royal children being called on to demonstrate their dancing skills to diplomatic visitors. Dance was often a natural complement and generic extension to the courtly battle-games of joust and tournament which similarly accompanied aristocratic relations. In fact the early association between the two may have been fundamental in shaping the commonest form of courtly entertainment throughout the period: this frequently involved teams of dancers, clearly members of the court rather than professional entertainers, often in matching costumes and masks, performing elaborate exhibition dances (Twycross and Carpenter 128-150). Elements of team competition, of personal physical skill and of spectacular self-performance, are common to both, with the link between dance and joust established early in court organisation. The fifteenth century *Justus of Pees* formalises the association, laying down that jousts should conclude with prizes awarded by the ladies to the best jousts: 'Then schall he þ^t the Diamonde ys gyf un to he schall take a lady by þe honde & he gynnyth the daunce. and when the ladiis hath dauncyd as longe as hem lykyth then spicys & wyne & drynke And then a voyde' (Arthur, 40). Like the battle-games, dance was a mode by which noble men and women could perform and celebrate their courtly status. This kind of elite performance probably lies behind Thomas Elyot's interpretation of dance in *The Boke of the Governor*: 'the personages of man and woman daunsinge, do expresse or sette out the figure of very nobilitie: whiche in the higher astate it is contained, the more eccellente is the vertue in estimation' (Elyot 79).

The costumes of the dancers, like the heraldic panoply of jousts, were a crucial element of the performance. Spectacle and flamboyance, the exotic and strange, and conspicuous luxury all contributed importantly to the aesthetic of display. Early wardrobe accounts from the reign of Edward III record many sets of matching costumes and masks which seem patently designed for such teams of dancers. For Christmas at Guildford in 1347 fourteen peacocks' heads and pairs of wings are spectacularly linked with fourteen tunics painted with peacocks' eyes, fourteen angels' heads of silver with fourteen tunics painted with gold and silver stars (Juliet Vale 69-75). The following year fourteen green worsted tunics and fourteen red supertunics dropped with gold appear along with various

sets of twelve masks, including heads of wodewoses, of men with lions' heads above, and so on. This pattern is durable: two hundred years later, the court of Edward VI paid for sets of: 'vij doblettes and vij pere of hosen for a Maske of deathes being medyoxs half man half deathe' and 'vj great tayle of wicker made for a maske of Cattes all couered over *with* cattles tayles' (Feuillerat, *Edward VI* 130-31). Later Revels accounts confirm the dazzling wealth with which these 'disguisings' were dressed: these are not stage costumes creating an illusion of glamour from cheap materials, but are of elaborately costly cloth adorned with real gold.

Elaborate and fantastic as these costumes sound, the dances themselves rarely seem to have developed sustained or explicit mimesis or narrative, although they might well contribute to a wider theme across an evening's performance. But an underlying structure of combat is often detectable as teams of dancers engage, and court performances often include indoor battle scenes that sound as much balletic as actual (McGowan 72, 125-6). Another more or less explicit structure underlying many dance events was to cast them as the 'unexpected' irruption of exotic visitors, bringing adventure, challenge, honour or gifts to the assembled court (Twycross and Carpenter 151-68).

Dance framed and contributed to much more diverse and complex spectacles, which reflect what Malcolm Vale has called an 'eclecticism [which] characterized the practice and aesthetics of display [throughout] north-west Europe at this time' (167), while also testifying to the complex organisational structures that underlay courtly performance. Instrumental music and song were important elements, often contributing directly to a topic for the entertainment; costumed address or debates might salute the host, interpret speechless dance or action, or develop a theme. Thus at a 1527 entertainment in a specially constructed 'hous ... for revells' at Greenwich, a debate between Love and Riches was presented first by two groups of singers, followed by two actors who 'plaied a dialog', and then by a combat at barriers, before concluding in dance (Hall 722-4; Rawlinson). Most elaborately, moveable stages or 'pageant cars', set with rich and spectacular scenery, might not only carry in teams of dancers, but enable the development of enacted narrative. One of the disguisings for the wedding of Prince Arthur to Katherine of Aragon in 1502 brought in three pageant cars representing a castle, a ship and a mountain, bearing young nobles who enacted an allegorical assault by Knights of the Mount of Love on the castle of ladies,

winning the inhabitants of the castle to join them in 'many goodly daunces' (Kipling, *Receyt* 56-7). The spectacular effects of scenic construction, light and sound, costume and dance, offer a constantly varying, visually and aurally dazzling reflection around a theme, loosely grounded in the twin structures of combat and exotic visit.

Performers and spectators

Court performance is theatrically distinctive in the unique and complex relationship it developed between performers and spectators. Unlike formal drama there is often no absolute distinction between a body of players who organise and perform, and a body of spectators who come to watch: these categories overlap and may shift and change even during the performance. While court entertainments often included various groups of paid and professional performers, most especially musicians, the central visual and choreographed events were almost always performed by the members of the court themselves, both male and female courtiers who danced, enacted battle games, and presented spectacle to other members of the court. In many shows those performing might draw members of the audience into their dance, or address themselves to particular spectators. While we know little of who devised and organised these shows in the earlier period, it seems clear that they must have involved senior members of court with easy access to its financial and wardrobe resources. The better documented accounts of the later organisation of revels under the Tudors confirm that devisers are generally court insiders (Streitberger 3-21). The frequency with which shows could allude to the immediate political and personal concerns of the court demonstrates that even monarchs themselves might have a hand in approving, if not in devising, entertainments in which they too sometimes performed.

At all levels, then, courtly revels blurred separation between the performance and its audience. In status, occupation and gender, in personal acquaintance and individual identity, performers and spectators belonged largely to the same group, moving between the different roles involved, within the same closed community. This elite intertwining of production and reception informs both the purposes and the strategies of court entertainments. As peers, the performers acted both to demonstrate their own status and

to give honour to the spectators. Courtiers offered performances to serve their monarch, assert the glory of the court and show their own skill; royal and noble children honoured their parents while publicly embodying the glorious line of succession; high-ranking nobles provided entertainment to honour visiting ambassadors, while demonstrating their own spectacular accomplishment. The identity of the performers thus became a key factor in the meaning of the performance. Spectators were eager to identify the performers, with eyewitness reports careful to name those who took part, and regretful when 'The presse was soe great, that I might not see to write the names' ('Marriage' 31). Increasing play is made with the concealment and revelation of identity. From at least the time of Edward III there was a long-standing association between court entertainments and masks, which eventually, of course, gave their name to a popular version of the genre itself. In the early sixteenth century we begin to find reports of dancers' masks being removed as a significant element of the performance, occasioning real or playful astonishment and delight as the dancer is identified (Twycross and Carpenter 166-88; McGowan 112).

This whole mode of performance emerges from the environment of the court itself (Gunn 1-14). The closed community fosters the court's focus on itself, and the social, political and personal relationships between its most eminent members, which are played out in both the content and the performance of entertainment. Life at court is lived largely in public, while its members are constantly observed even in apparently informal or intimate situations. Court relationships were often understood and interpreted as performances observed by those eager to understand the workings of power: as Thomas Randolph, the English agent in Scotland, remarked in 1561, 'Out of the countenances of princes, he that can judge 'may pycke owte' some likelihood of their thoughts and disposition'.⁴ Both monarchs and courtiers became adept at using the modes of performance to reveal or conceal their thoughts and intentions.

This context of lived performance shapes both the aesthetics of expression and the more particular purposes of court entertainments. The public life and elite power-structures of the court encouraged a self-consciously oblique allusiveness of expression (Lerer). So it is not surprising that courtly performance prioritised spectacle above speech,

⁴ *CSP Scotland* 1.577. Randolph continues: 'While she talked with Monsieur de Foix 'yt was marked by other before I came in, and after I sawe myself, maynie alterations in her face'.

and the allegorical, emblematic and even enigmatic above the explicit. Avoiding the directly mimetic, the spectacles favoured the elite audience who could recognise and enjoy their allusions and interpret their scholarly or political implications. Couched in the international performance language of educated culture, entertainments could, where desired, comment on and even contribute to local, national and international politics.

Court performances may often appear to confirm Francis Bacon's dismissive judgement that 'these things are but toys' (118); but they are not always entirely frivolous either in their original purposes or in what they can reveal to later cultural and theatrical historians. Since the entertainments are so diverse, each one embedded in its immediate social and political context, the second part of this essay will look a little more closely at a range of specific shows. The aim is to probe in more detail some of the intriguing glimpses of the research pathways that court performance can offer.

1494: Twelfth Night disguising

Unusually detailed information survives about the revel presented at Henry VII's court for Twelfth Night 1494. An extensive narrative account is contained in the *Great Chronicle of London*, along with much briefer (and rather different) accounts in other histories, and some few recorded entries from the Clerk of the Works and the Chamber accounts (Streitberger 26-30, 240). This allows us to gauge both the scale and the content of the entertainment. Westminster Hall was prepared with seating scaffolds for a great audience including the King and Queen, foreign ambassadors, and the mayor and council of London as well as the court. The show began with a 'goodly Interlude' by the King's players, which was interrupted by William Cornish, a member of the Chapel Royal, who rode in dressed as Saint George followed by a 'ffayer vyrgyn ... ledyng by a sylkyn lace a Terryble and huge Rede dragun' (Fabyan 251). After delivering a speech, Cornish sang anthems of St George with the Chapel choristers, before the virgin was received onto the Queen's dais. This pageant was followed by elaborate dances from a team of 24 male and female courtiers.

This entertainment demonstrates vividly the mixture of media, and of professional and courtly players, the emphasis on glorious spectacle, and the permeable line between spectators and performers that characterise courtly revels. Revealing work has focused on

the show's political and organisational implications (Anglo 'Cornish'; Kipling *Triumph* 101-2). But the particular character of the *Great Chronicle* evidence also points us toward a number of further research areas: the venue invites exploration of issues of space and place; the players, of gendered performance; and the narrative account itself, of the relationship of city and court.

The revel was staged in Westminster Hall, a historic building surviving today and still in use for high-status ceremonial occasions. We therefore have access not only to the defined geographical space within which the 1494 audience and action were choreographed, but to some continuing sense of the cultural environment the Hall presented. We recognise it today as a heritage site whose history lends crucial imaginative and memorial significance to the contemporary events it hosts, such as the address of the President of the United States to Parliament in 2011 (Westminster Hall). Yet in 1494 the Hall was already 400 years old, established as the venue for the courts of justice, for coronation feasts and ceremonial events of national importance. The chronicle narrative of the revel records how its perceived historical dignity contributed to the impact and significance of the 1494 show, confirming the relevance for court revels of Nick Kaye's observation of site-specific performance as characterised by 'articulate exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined' (5). The narrator draws attention to the setting, emphasising royal concern to enable and enrich the Hall for its audience: the 'halle at that tyme was hangid with aras, and stagid alength the halle at the kyngys cost, That the pepyll mygth well & easily see the sayd dysport' (Fabian 251). The placing of the spectators is carefully reported, with the King, the ambassadors 'and every astate ... assygnyd unto theyr standyng'. The grand scale of the venue helped to shape the splendour of the spectacle which interacted with it, with St George entering on horseback while the dragon 'In Sundry placys of the halle as he passyd spytt ffyre at hys mowth'.⁵ The writer observes the King's historic great table of estate pressed into service: 'a Table of stoon ay standing there was garnysshid w^t Napery, lygthis, & othyr nescessaryes' (252). The narrative attention given to the venue suggests that it contributed actively to the spectators' experience of the occasion, framing the dignity and national resonance of the show enacted within it. The Hall defined

⁵ Cp the traditional horseback entry of the 'Champion of England' into Westminster Hall, still a feature at the 1821 coronation banquet of George IV: <http://www.urban75.org/london/westminster-hall-parliament-photos.html>

the audience as well as the performance, aggrandising their status to themselves by confirming their position in the social hierarchy of the spectators, who were equally on show. The detailed narrative account conveys how the meaning of the entertainment to the audience on the single night of its performance was bound up with the way it configured the geographical and cultural space of its setting in Westminster Hall. Since courts in part defined themselves through their inhabiting of aristocratic spaces, place can offer us rich insights into the experience of court performance.

Our understanding of this performance venue is especially enhanced by the nature of the narrative report. The *Great Chronicle of London* was compiled by a guildsman, possibly Robert Fabyan, a draper, Sheriff and Alderman, and tends to offer a City perspective on court events (DNB sv Fabyan). The account of this entertainment is written from the point of view of an eye-witness but not of a court insider. Its focus is on the current Mayor of London, who was dubbed knight at the feast and then invited 'by the kyngys Commaundement to tary & see such dysportys as that nygth shuld be shewid' (251); the narrative is concerned not only with the disguising itself, but with the way that the mayor and his brethren were honoured in and by the occasion. The mayor's experience frames the whole account, his investiture acting as our gateway to the description of the performance and the account ending as he 'cam hoom by brekyng of the daye, and ... kyst his wyffe as a dowble lady' (252). This gives us a distinctive perspective on the whole revel as an arena for Court-City relationships (Barron 409-12). It perhaps accounts for the special alertness to the venue, and to the arrangement and treatment of the audience, sharing a view of the event as a whole from a high-status but non-courtly interest-group. This may inform the alertness to the economics of the event, seen in comments on the dancers' 'costious' costumes or on the careless luxury of the male dancers whose athleticism 'made that theyr spangyls of goold & othyr of theyr Garnysshys ffyll ffrom theym Rygth habundantly'.⁶ The chronicle demonstrates how court performance might at times reach beyond the court to engage a wider civic audience. It confirms how the significance of such revels lay not only in their content but in the politics of the performance as a whole, within its specific social and cultural environment. The *Great Chronicle* enables us to do that, while demonstrating the

⁶ Cp Fabyan 311, 315.

importance of a nuanced reading of the particular narratology of our surviving reports of court performance (McGavin 1-13).

This is not to say that the narrative does not offer valuable insight into more formal aspects of the performance, especially in including an unusually graphic and responsive description of the danced disguising with which it concluded. This reveals the entirely established acceptance of women performers, even in shows with such large-scale audiences, confirming Barbara Jean Harris's observation of the court's need for 'accomplished, richly dressed, aristocratic women', since 'without them, the tournaments, processions, masques, and banquets essential to the conduct of diplomacy and the spectacle of kingship could not have taken place' (240). It is not entirely clear whether on this occasion women's roles moved beyond dancing: the 'ffayer vyrgyn attyrid lyke unto a kyngys dowghtyr' who leads in the dragon was most probably a boy chorister of the Chapel Royal which was responsible for the rest of the St George episode, although the fact that 'the vyrgyn was ladd unto the Quenys standyng' at the end of the action might suggest a female courtier. But there is no doubt about the dancers, 'xij Gentyllmen ledyng by kerchyffys of pleasance xij ladyys being all Costiously & goodly dysguysyd, as well the men as women'. The women take equal part in the elaborate formation dances which lasted 'by a large howir'. The report also gives us a uniquely revealing insight into a gendered aesthetic of court dance:

The ... Gentyllmen lepid and daunsid all the length of the halle as they cam, and the 'ladies' slode aftyr theym as they had standyn upon a fframe Runnyng, w^t whelys, They kept theyr Tracis soo demwyr & cloos that theyr lymmiys movid all at oonys ... It was wondyrffull to behold the excedyng lepys Ganbawdys & turnyngys above ground which the Gentyllmen made ... But Evyrmore the ladyes kept theyr ffirst maner soo demuyrly as they had been Imagis (251-2)

This captures a choreography, whether habitual or specific, which echoes Elyot's characterisation of gendered dance:

the meuyng of the man wold be more vehement, of the woman more delycate, and with lesse aduansynge of the body, signifienge the courage and strength that ought to be in a man, and the plesant sobrenesse that shuld be in a woman. (78)

The women participate openly in the self-display of public performance, while enacting the 'demure' modesty of traditional femininity. It appears that they also played across the boundary between performer and audience that court performance often dissolved. The narrator explains that in spite of their demeanour 'soom of theym cowde speke quyk & delyver Inglysh yf they were ferre attemptid 'as soom of theym were there then Reportid'' (252). The playful 'attempting' of the limits of performance, and the readiness of the women to move in and out of performance mode to assert an agency which their dancing appeared to deny, underlines the sophisticated self-awareness of court display. It suggests that a complex culture of female court performance significantly preceded the Stuart court where it has been most fully studied.

1519: Disguising at Newhall

The 1494 revel is a fine example of a large-scale event in which we can find evidence opening broad research questions about the nature of court performance. A more intimate event can reveal how precisely the court might use performance politically – in this case to enact to itself an internal political upheaval, taming potential danger in safely festive form. Edward Hall's chronicle describes an evening performance in September 1519 at Newhall in Essex at the court of the young Henry VIII. First entered 'eight Maskers with white berdes, and long and large garmentes of Blewe satten panned with Sipres' (Hall 599). These dancers clearly enacted the part of old men: 'they daunsed with Ladies sadly, and communed [talked] not with the ladies after the fassion of Maskers, but behaued theimselfes sadly'. This troupe was followed by a contrasting team; twelve 'young gentlemen entered the chamber, of the whiche sixe wer al in yeloww sattin ... and sixe other, wer in like maner in Grene: the yeloww sattin was freted with siluer of Damaske, and so was the grene very richely to behold : and then euery Masker toke a ladie and daunsed ... & commoned a great while'. As Streitberger points out, the entertainment seems based on a theme of Youth and Age, which was reinforced by a 'pastym' of Summer and Winter which preceded the mask, played by the Children of the Chapel (101-2). But while perfectly coherent as a relatively simple decorative spectacle on a familiar *topos*, it is clear that this performance engaged the court in significant further layers of meaning and participation.

In form, the danced disguising follows the apparently relatively newly popular 'amorous mask', in which the lavishly disguised and masked dancers chose partners from among the spectators, enabling 'commoning' or private conversation between men and women (Twycross and Carpenter 169-70). Since one partner was masked and the other bare-faced, this led to play on both intimacy and identity, which often culminated in the removal of the masks and revelation of the performers. In the 1519 disguising, both the commoning and the revelation of identity carry especial charge. When the white-bearded maskers refused to converse and 'behaved themselves sadly ... the quene plucked of their visours' to reveal the performers, to general merriment, as 'somewhat aged, the youngest man was fiftie at the least. The Ladies had good sporte to se these auncient persones Maskers'. Laughter was roused by the inappropriateness of masking for old men, with the joke here intensified by the fact that the maskers *are* what they perform. They violate Castiglione's recommendation that there should be a delightful difference between the dancer and the persona adopted. In a mask the trick is:

... to disguise a yong man in an olde mans attire, but so that his garments be not a hindrance to him to shew his nimblenesse of person. ... it were not meete ... a prince should take upon him to be like a prince in deede ... for it is no noveltie at all to any man for a prince to bee a prince. (99-100)

The green and yellow youthful maskers, however, also contravene this principle. When 'their visers were taken of, and then the ladies knewe them' it was revealed that they were led by the King himself, fittingly taking part in the joyful performance of youth and love. The success of this mask depended in part on the audience's familiarity with the form, enabling light-hearted ironic play with its modes of performance. The participation of Henry VIII as performer also emphasises how these entertainments acted as self-conscious extensions of court life itself, unsettling the distinction between theatre and actuality as well as that between spectator and performer. Queen Katherine and the ladies, similarly poised between actor and onlooker, strikingly present an embryonic version of the scenario so popular in later romantic comedy: the witty, laughing woman who both mocks and confirms the amorous approaches of men.⁷

⁷ Cp Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* or *Much Ado about Nothing*.

If the entertainment played with form, it also carried more topical, and playfully serious resonances for the court, using this familiar variation of the disguising to comment on a current issue of court politics. 1519 saw a significant re-structuring of the internal organisation of Henry VIII's court through the affair now known as 'the expulsion of the minions' (Walker); Edward Hall's account of this episode throws revealing light on the September mask. In May 1519, apparently on the advice of his Council, Henry dismissed a number of relatively new young appointees to his Privy Chamber. These young men had been part of an embassy sent to Paris a few months earlier to negotiate the return of Tournai to the French, leaving four young French nobles as hostages at the English court. According to Hall, while in Paris they had indulged in riotous behaviour with Francis I and his court: 'they with the Frenche kyng roade daily disguysed through Paris, throwyng Egges, stones and other foolishe trifles at the people, whiche light demeanoure of a kyng was muche discommended and gested at' (Hall 597). On their return they remained committed to 'Frenche vices and bragges, so that all the estates of Englande were by them laughed at'. Hall links this to the intervention of the King's Council, who 'perceiued that certain young men in [Henry's] priuie chamber not regardyng his estate nor degree, were so familier and homely with hym, and plaid suche light touches with hym that they forgot themselves' and petitioned the King to remove them 'for the maintenance of his honor' (598). In the place of these minions, 'Then was there foure sad and auncient knightes, put into the kynges priuie chamber, whose names wer sir Richard Wyngfeld, sir Richard lernyngham, sir Richard Weston and sir William Kyngston: and diuerse officers wer changed in all places'.

These circumstances add a graphic topicality to the September mask of Youth and Age. When the old-man disguisers were unmasked, they were found to include 'sir Richard Wyngfeld ... sir Richard Weston, sir Willyam Kyngston' – the same 'sad and auncient knightes' who had been appointed to replace the minions. Those young gentlemen of the Privy Chamber had previously been Henry's masking companions; the new venerable inner circle ironically maintains this companionable role in the king's pleasures, while self-mockingly enacting their distance from it by their serious demeanour. They function as a good-humoured anti-mask to highlight and intensify the splendid display of youthful energy in the King's own dancing team. That team equally plays into the self-referentiality of the occasion, since Henry was accompanied by the four young hostages of France. Hall's

narrative emphasises the laughter and delight the mask occasioned as the court celebrated its internal politics with this series of splendid insider-allusions. But the light-hearted event seems also designed to make some serious assertions. The mask of old men enacted their deference to Henry's youthful glory, while at the same time asserting the responsible gravity that now supported it. The inclusion of the French hostages meanwhile demonstrated that the expulsion of the minions should not be understood as a break with the French court itself or even its revels. A performance that might initially seem a charmingly bland piece of courtly display can be seen to engage the court in a sophisticated enactment of and contribution to its own internal politics. It is perhaps not surprising that Henry took a personal interest in the organisation of this particular mask, apparently devising and keeping his own costume (Streitberger 102; Twycross 401).

1412: personal disguising of Prince Henry

The 1519 mask demonstrates the exploitation of self-conscious continuity between court performance and court life. Henry VIII's personal pleasure in performing, and active participation in his court's entertainments, along with the greatly increased recording of its activities, make his early reign especially rich in such evidence. But it seems clear that such consciously theatrical performance of the courtly self was embedded in court culture from much earlier, and might inflect courtly relationships well beyond the sphere of formal entertainment. An anecdote from the early life of Henry V appears to record a moment where, rather than performance reflecting events at court, the practices of court entertainments are drawn upon to shape and determine political and personal relationships. The account of this 1412 episode, although first recorded in an early sixteenth-century manuscript, appears to derive ultimately from a probable eyewitness, James Butler, fourth Earl of Ormonde (Kingsford). The early popular histories of Henry V are full of colourful but unverifiable stories and it is perfectly possible that this is another; but its unusual detail, strangeness, and enigmatic purpose suggest that it does indeed allow us a genuine glimpse of the reach of court performance practice.

The report describes an attempt by Henry, while still Prince of Wales, to reconcile with his father following an estrangement between them. According to the writer, Henry carefully choreographed an interview with the king:

when this noble Prince was aduertised of his father's iealosie and mistrust by some his secret friends of the Kings Councell, he disguised himselfe in a gowne of blewe satten or damaske made full of iletts or holes, and at euerie ilet the needle wherewth it was made hanginge there by the thridde of silke, and about his arme he wore a doggs Collor sett full [11/12] of S. S. of goulde and the teretts of the same also of fine golde. And thus apparrelled wth greate Companie of Lords he came to the Kinge his father, who at that time lay at Westminster. (Kingsford 11-12)

Arriving at the palace, the Prince ordered his large retinue to advance no further than the fire in the Great Hall, in order 'to giue the lesse occasion of mistrust to the Kinge his father'. In his 'strange apparel' he then requested a private meeting with his father in which he swore allegiance, offering the king his dagger to take his son's life if he should distrust him, and triggering a personal and political reconciliation.

A serious political rift and reconciliation between the prince and his father at this time is known from historical sources, and if anything the puzzling nature of Henry's reported actions in achieving it might seem to testify to the account's authenticity. The exact purposes, and effects, of the episode remain impossible to interpret; but it is the context of court performance that gives the most suggestive clues to what was happening. It is clear that the description of Henry's dress is intended to be understood not in any modern sense of a *disguise* as concealing his identity, but as a costume for a *disguising* (Twycross and Carpenter 129-33). The lavish gown of blue satin or damask, decorated with gold jewellery, eyelets and embroidery, echoes many of the descriptions of the garments for later masks and disguisings: 'disguised in whyte Satyne and grene, enbroudered with letters and castels of fine golde in bullion, the garments were of straunge facion, with also straunge cuttes, euery cutte knytte wyth poyntes of fine golde and tassels of the same' (Hall 516). These are sixteenth-century records, but the court of Edward III in the 1340s was already providing tunics painted with peacocks' eyes, or gold and silver stars, or green garments embroidered with pheasants' feathers (Vale 71). Scholars have also compared Chaucer's portrait of the dancing Mirth in his translation of the *Romance of the Rose*, dressed:

In samet, with briddis wrought,
 And with gold beten ful fetysly...
 Wrought was his robe in straunge gise,
 And al to-slytered for queyntise. (836-40)

In both style and vocabulary, Henry's gown is recognisable as performance dress.

But why would the prince choose to attend such a serious meeting in the extravagant costume of a disguising? An answer to this may lie in the emblematic details of the costume, difficult as these are now to interpret. Like the performances themselves, disguising clothes frequently incorporated symbols, allegories and emblems. Edward III's tournament and masking clothes were often decorated with embroidered mottoes: 'It is as it is', 'syker as ye wodebynd', or most famously the words associated with the Garter emblem, 'honi soit qui mal y pense' (Vale 65). The more expansive accounts of later costumes indicate how tantalisingly obscure or complex such *imprese* might be. Hall's account of the Field of Cloth of Gold meticulously describes many visual puzzles, one of the simplest being the French King's 'garments 'enbrodred ful of little bookes of white Satten, and in thebokes were written *a me* ... whiche was enterpreted to be *Liber*, a booke, within this booke was written as is sayd, *a me*, put these two together and it maketh *libera me*' (614). This emblem was one part of a complicated sequence which Hall painstakingly spells out while concluding 'thus was thinterpretacion made, but whether it were so in all thinges or not I may not say'. Even to contemporaries meaning might remain uncertain.

Prince Henry's emblems were accompanied by no words to explain them, but the unusualness of the dangling needles and the golden dog collar strongly implies that they were not simply decorative but designed to convey meaning, meaning presumably related to his relationship with his father. It has been suggested that the needles may recall a ceremony at Queen's College, Oxford, with which Henry was associated, in which needles are given out with the injunction to 'Take this and be thrifty' (Kingsford xxvi-xxvii). But this has little obvious bearing on the situation. It seems more probable that the unfinished embroidery on the gorgeous robe reflects the prince's presentation of himself as the unfinished creation of his father. In the interview he apparently emphasised his submission

as ‘naturall sonn and liegeman’, urging that ‘my life is not so desirous to me that I woulde liue one daye that I shoulde be to your displeasure’ (12-13). The arm-band collar may carry similar weight. The gold SS emphasise the prince’s royalty and position in the house of Lancaster whose livery collar this was. But this is explicitly described as a hound’s collar not a man’s, a detail sharpened by the gold ‘teretts’ – swivel fastenings associated with dog’s collars (*OED* sv *terret*). Prince Henry identifies himself as his father’s dog, his follower and servant, as well as his heir. The showy and luxurious dress becomes, paradoxically, an emblem of humility and subservience, reinforcing the prince’s theatrical delivery of his dagger and his life into his father’s hands.

The episode plays out paradoxically, with a dynamic tension between the self-assertion of Henry’s confidently magnificent performance and the self-abasement implied by his costume and words. It is, as Derek Pearsall astutely remarks, ‘difficult to imagine a more spectacular act of theatrical self-representation’ (571). What is perhaps even more startling is to find this mode of performance deployed as a medium for private communication. The prince ostentatiously denies public view: he brings a ‘greate Companie of Lords’ as his supporters but commands them to stay in the Hall ‘notwthstanding they were greatlie and ofte desired to the contrarie by the Lords and greate estats of the Kings Courte’. The interview eventually takes place in the king’s ‘secrett chamber ... in the presence of three or foure persons in whom the Kinge had his most confidence’. Henry’s performance is directed at a single spectator, as he plays out his relationship to his king and father as well as his own status. His final theatrical gesture invites the king to enter into the performance, enacting forgiveness or rejection on the prince’s own terms. According to the narrative, this staged show was highly successful, transforming the King’s perception of his son’s character and intentions: ‘thus ... was the wrongfull imaginacion of his fathers hart utterlye avoyded’ (13). It is a persuasive demonstration of the way in which performance could be deliberately appropriated as the medium for courtly relationships and for the staging of the self between individuals. It also shows how at least from the early fifteenth century formal court entertainments had developed an oblique, subtle but powerful language for the fashioning and communication of the self.

1579: celebration for James VI

While Prince Henry's interview reveals how early and thoroughly the modes of performance might be embedded in courtly life, the primary aim of court entertainments seems always to have been public and celebratory. Frequently staged in part for visiting dignitaries, they functioned as an international theatrical mode through which the courts of Europe honoured, imitated, criticised and aimed to impress each other. In spite of the value for the 'strange' and new in spectacles and shows, it also seems clear that genres were immensely durable across the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, not only in the broad focus on display and dance, but even in particular forms. The revel apparently staged in celebration of James VI's assumption of adult rule in Scotland in 1579-80 is an example from late in the period that can reveal both the internationalism and the historical longevity of forms of court performance.

Following a strict Protestant upbringing at Stirling, James VI was declared of age to assume personal rule in 1578 at the age of twelve. In late September 1579 he finally travelled to take up residence in Edinburgh, making a spectacular formal royal entry to the city in October. Just before this, in early September, his 37-year old cousin Esmé Stewart, Sieur d'Aubigny, had arrived from France, very quickly winning James's affection and becoming a favourite of the young king. D'Aubigny, quickly suspected to be seeking power for himself, introduced James to the flamboyant courtly culture of France, and his influence can be seen in the evidence of renewed performance activity during his years in Scotland. In December 1579, with James's court newly established in Edinburgh, the Treasurer's Accounts record payments 'to his hienes violeris to be certane mask claithis', including 28 ells of red and yellow taffeta, silver trimmings, and six 'fensing swerdis' and 'fensing dagaris' (Carpenter 'Royal Court 1579-80' 2-3). Intriguingly, there also survive in the work of Alexander Montgomerie, a poet who became a favourite with the young king, two texts, or possibly one two-part text, for a court disguising: *The Navigatioun* and *The Cartell of the thre Ventrours Knichtis* (Montgomerie 90-8). In late 1579 Montgomerie had recently returned to Scotland, possibly in association with the arrival of D'Aubigny, from some years of travelling in Europe (Lyll 61-75). While there is no firm evidence to link text and record, it seems likely that Montgomerie's speeches, which celebrate the young king as just coming to maturity, formed a script for the Christmas 1579-80 performance. This combination of

script and record enables us both to understand something of the form and occasion of the performance itself, and to recognise its international and historical links.

The Navigatioun consists of a speech of introduction by a presenter or *trunchman* [interpreter] for a disguising. He salutes the young king as the 'bravest burgeoun [bud] brekking to the Rose', depicting the government of his kingdom as a flourishing garden: the Council planted 'lyk trees about thy grace', the king's kin as a protective hedge of 'fragrant flouris', the preachers as gardeners. Although there is no evidence of stage machinery, his words recall emblematic pageant structures such as the vision of England produced for the wedding of Prince Arthur to Katherine of Aragon, 'of colour grene, plantid full of fresshe trees' (Kipling, *Receyt* 67). The speech then introduces a courtly disguising in which elaborately costumed visitors will arrive, supposedly from distant lands, to offer reverence to James and his court. The speaker explains that he has come with companions 'From Turkie, Egypt and from arabie', describing the journey they have taken from Constantinople to Edinburgh. His elaborately detailed account of the stages of their voyage evokes the many ship-pageant cars of court spectacle, a concrete example of which would appear fifteen years later at the baptism of James's eldest son.⁸ *The Navigatioun* acts only as an introduction to the wordless disguising itself, and we have no clear sense of what was performed once the presenter concludes: 'My fellouis comes nou. I mon mak away'. The expenses on materials and weapons confirm that the performance in 1579-80 included splendid costume and also some form of combat display with the fencing foils and daggers. The *Cartell* may perhaps record a speech from the exotic visitors of the *Navigatioun*, since it claims to be spoken by three adventurers seeking honour, who outline more briefly their perilous voyage from the Mediterranean to James's court and challenge three of his knights by the toss of a coin to combat games 'in play or earnest' (24). This does not wholly fit the peaceable *personae* created in the presenter's speech, and the *Cartell*'s allusions to running at the ring do not quite fit the fencing weapons of the record.⁹ But while the *Cartell* may have been composed for another occasion, these texts and records all confirm a common combination of spectacular visit and performed combat.¹⁰

⁸ See Bath, and for a parallel disguising voyage and other ship-pageants Twycross and Dutton 346-9.

⁹ For mismatches between disguisings and their introductory scripts see Twycross and Dutton 325-6.

¹⁰ Cp 1582 'furnessing of necessarie apparrell and wappinnis to a mask dans' (Carpenter, 'Royal Court 1581-2' 10).

This entertainment re-enacts a resonantly persistent structure for disguising entertainment. In the 'courtly mumming', modelled in part on the traditions of seasonal luck visits, magnificently costumed 'strangers' enter to honour the court and invite the spectators to participate in a playful challenge, most often a game of dice used as a means of presenting gifts, and to dance (Twycross and Carpenter 151-68). The form has a notably long history: as early as 1377 we hear of a 'disguizedly aparailed' cavalcade of London citizens who ceremoniously visited the court of the ten-year-old Prince Richard, to play at dice for gold and jewels, and to dance. It has been pointed out that the 1579-80 disguising, possibly performed on Twelfth Night, casts itself as a secular visitation of the Magi – three Eastern strangers coming to honour the youthful King James (Lyll 66); this allusion already structured the 1377 event, which also shaped its entertainment as a gift-visit from exotic rulers to the young royal heir. The Epiphany allusion in each show combines with further topical political comment: in Richard's case to parliamentary politics over his imminent inheritance of the throne (Twycross and Carpenter 155-7), in James's to a daring reference to hopes for the English succession. As the adventurers' voyage passes the cliffs of Dover they remark, 'Vhat if the Quene wer deid? / Quha suld be nixt or to the Croun succeed?' replying 'Syndrie wes sibbe bot ay 3our grace wes nar' (229-32) ['What if the Queen were dead? / Who should be next, or to the Crown succeed? ... Sundry people were related but always your grace was closer.']

Between 1377 and 1579 this pattern is repeatedly re-staged, whether in Lydgate's puzzling fifteenth century 'Mumming for the Mercers of London', Henry VIII's elaborately 'unexpected' interruption of Wolsey's ambassadors feast, or George Gascoigne's 1572 wedding mask for Viscount Mountacute, even persisting on into the satirised 'Mask of Muscovites' in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*.¹¹ The fiction of the invasion of the exotic outsider seems to echo, if it is not derived from, the Arthurian romance tradition of welcoming the adventurous challenger – with Gawain's Green Knight himself a version of a 'christemas gomen'. Celebrating within its own defining environment, the court models itself as the gracious host to the rich and strange who come to honour, astonish, challenge but ultimately reinforce its power both within and beyond its own sphere.

¹¹ For these examples see Twycross and Carpenter 151-68; Gascoigne 382-94.

The examples mentioned above are all from English and Scottish sources, and echo each other – sometimes, as in the case of the Mediterranean voyage in Lydgate's, Gascoigne's and Montgomerie's texts, extremely closely; but there are records of numerous French and Burgundian *mascarades* that present similar exotic visitations, and many closely analogous scripts for *cartels* (Lyll 65 n7). In fact we might expect the immediate influences on Montgomerie's text to be more European than English: while his early life is obscure, he appears to have spent most of the 1570s in the Netherlands, Spain and France; there is no record of his visiting England and his non-theatrical poetry shows clear French influence. In Scotland, courtly performance culture had been interrupted by the long minorities of both Mary Queen of Scots and her son James. Mary, brought up in France, had briefly brought its performance culture to the Scottish court during her personal reign of 1561-7, and it is probable that the 1579-80 event was similarly encouraged by D'Aubigny. Closely analogous to English models yet probably more directly influenced by European practice, the *Navigatioun* and *Cartel* thus testify powerfully to the inherent internationality of court performance, as of courtly culture itself.

Conclusion

Much remains to explore in the spectacular world of court performance. As the documents on which research depends – correspondence, financial accounts, state papers and ephemera – have been gradually becoming more accessible, more can emerge about both the shaping contexts of particular performances and the trends and patterns across time and space. Courtly entertainment ranges from grand festivals designed to affirm the international glory of a state or nation, to the private mask or disguising that might shape relationships between individuals. Each can throw light on the other. The material culture of costume, spectacle and machinery exists in a continuum with the performed display of everyday courtly life, while events presented as entertainments overlap with formal ceremony on one side and courtly sports and games on the other. Such continuities show how research into particular events and activities can contribute to broader generic understanding of the organisation, purposes, production and experience of an international performance language of affirmation, critique and diplomacy. The unconnected examples chosen to examine here indicate many paths, variously trodden, which could repay further

study: venue and space, gendered performance, courtly life as performance, overt and hidden topical meanings, and the rich and complex international comparisons and development of forms. These paths are dependent on our current knowledge: as we uncover more about these performance events, and as new critical questions develop, new insights into court performance will continue to emerge.

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